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ABSTRACT

The New York City Board of Education's unit on Latin America (Global Studies Grade 9) is a welcome and useful aid to teachers seeking to develop a social studies curriculum with a global perspective. Besides the contemporary relevance, the methodology of the curriculum closely adheres to current thinking on teaching social studies. The lessons and activities are based on open-ended inquiry, triggering student involvement with the use of primary documents and short secondary sources. Equal emphasis is given to economic, social, and cultural history. On the whole, the lessons are a useful starting point or supplement for the teacher. The unit's most surprising weakness, however, is its complete inability to develop a sense of global awareness. Latin America is treated in geo-political isolation. Linkages are not developed when they should be and lessons fail to point out intercontinental connections. In addition, each Latin American country is treated in isolation. Constant comparisons between the United States and Latin America may encourage some students to stereotype South America as undemocratic and poor. The structure of teaching strategies precludes a sense of historical development and periodization. This absence of historical rooting is concomitant with the weak attention given to skills development and writing. In their attempt to provide creative, motivating activities, the authors have robbed the students of too many chances to indulge their own creativity and practice their writing skills. The unit is less inquiry-based than it would appear, as students are not taught to ask questions themselves. (GEA)

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TEACHING BEYOND THE BORDERS:

A REVIEW OF THE GLOBAL STUDIES LATIN AMERICA UNIT

by Julian Cohen

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Teaching Beyond the Borders:
A Review of the Global Studies Latin America Unit

by Julian Cohen

The New York City Board of Education's new unit on Latin America (Global Studies Grade 9, Board of Education of the City of New York; 1988) is a welcome and useful aid to teachers seeking to develop a Social Studies curriculum with a global perspective. Designed to fit into a year-long program of Third World studies, the unit covers historical and contemporary topics in both South and Central America. Not only is the region important to American students, but the curriculum also provides an awareness of Third World issues and problems, thus adding a true multi-cultural perspective to the Social Studies curriculum. The 9th Grade program neatly balances the more traditional European studies and Western civilization topics that are covered in the 10th Grade Global Studies curriculum. (Global Studies Grade 10, Board of Education of the City of New York; 1985)

Besides the contemporary relevance, the methodology of the curriculum closely adheres to current thinking on teaching Social Studies. The lessons and planned activities are not didactic but are based on open-ended inquiry. Instead of providing information on Latin America, the curriculum poses certain questions and suggests strategies to explore the answers. As with previously published units, the general style of the teaching is inquiry based, triggering student involvement

with the use of primary documents and short secondary sources. Following current trends in historiography, the content is not narrow political studies but gives equal emphasis to economic, social and cultural history.

There is an obvious historical professionalism in the lessons. The material is drawn from a wide range of sources: the New York Times, anthropological accounts, World Bank reports, etc. Likewise, there is an obvious pedagogical professionalism. The lessons are clearly identified, each with specific aims and goals, and their sequence is logically arranged. Beginning with geography, the topics then move through political history to economic development. They end with contemporary focuses such as U.S. support for the Contras, the Arias peace initiative, and the impact of Latino culture. Each lesson has a clearly articulated goal, both in terms of content and performance objectives. Complex ideas - from underdevelopment to liberation theology - are simply and masterfly explained.

The authors of the curriculum are aware of the importance of concept and skill-based Social Studies teaching. They suggest that by teaching around "major ideas" students will be able to apply material from one context to another (p. ix), which is clearly the object of teaching history. Likewise, the lessons attempt to pay attention to skills development, in particular "critical thinking, reading, writing, map interpretation and problem solving." (p. ix) It is this concept and skill-based approach which makes the unit adaptable to teachers who will, no doubt, use it

for different purposes.

On the whole, the lessons are a useful starting point or supplement for the teacher seeking to develop a Third World or Latin American theme. However, on its own the unit will not suffice as a teaching aid. The authors provide their own caveat: the unit is only intended to supplement the teaching/learning process. (p. x) This is an important consideration because the lessons cannot stand on their own - individually or as a unit. This short article will explore the inherent problems of the unit. The purpose is to understand why the lessons can only be used selectively and, by implication, to suggest how they need to be supplemented.

The most suprising weakness in the design of the Global Studies curriculum is its complete inability to develop the students' sense of global awareness. The introduction to the Western European unit (Grade 10) stressed the importance of a world perspective, of not seeing Europe in isolation and of assessing the contributions of Asians and Africans to Europe's development. This is a refreshing approach to both studying European history as well as enabling students to explore the ways in which our world is and has been interconnected. One would have expected the Latin American unit to build on this approach. Certainly, the broad questions asked suggest that the continent is studied in the context of North American and European development.

However, Latin America is treated in geo-political isolation. Theme II, which deals with colonialism, does

not even hint at linking South America with Europe's history. Spain and Portugal's motives for colonizing the continent are never questioned. There is no serious attempt to analyze the concept of colonization as an alliance between groups in different countries. In one lesson (Aim 8) the triangular trade is discussed without any reference to African societies as autonomous entities.

Linkages are not developed when they should be. For example, Aim 11 explains the independence movement in Haiti as an ideological product of the French revolution. The major idea of the lesson is 'interdependence'. Creative activities are designed to show students how Enlightenment ideas spread from Europe to the Caribbean. However, this concept of idea diffusion or ideological interdependence is never mentioned again - for example when the Catholic Church is discussed. The transference of Christianity, its adaptation and manipulation by Latin Americans is never explored in the lesson which specifically asks "What role did the Catholic Church play in the Spanish colonies?". (Aim 9) Again, in Strategy 17, which discusses the concept of liberation theology no mention is made of the differences between European and Latin American Catholicism. Surely the concept of idea diffusion needs to be stressed at every possible point to ensure that it is properly learned. Global connections - in this case ideological ones - need to be pointed out at all levels to develop the students' sense of global awareness.

There are other examples of the lessons' failure to point out intercontinental connections. Probably the most serious missed opportunity is the study of the Cuban revolution. The lesson (Strategy 16) makes no mention of the Soviet Union, the U.S. or the Cold War.

It is also strange that each Latin American country is treated in isolation. Countries are never compared and contrasted, the effect of one country's development on the others is never explored. For example, students need to consider the impact of the Cuban revolution elsewhere and they need to contrast it with the Nicaraguan revolution. Even the economic development of the region is treated as isolated case studies - and it is never linked back to the theme of colonialism. Teachers need to be aware of the lessons' failure to make these connections. They need to ask the questions which force the students to think globally.

One way that the unit does attempt to foster intercontinental connections is by constant comparisons with the United States. Springboard activities, designed to move from the known to the unknown, usually begin with a discussion of the U.S. For example, the lesson on political development in Brazil begins with a discussion of democracy in the U.S. This technique can be useful to get students involved in the lesson, but it can also perpetuate stereotypes. By focusing on the U.S. form of democracy or North American wealth and power, some students may simply stereotype South

America as undemocratic and poor by comparison. This is surely not the authors' aim. Instead of constant comparison to the U.S. students should be encouraged to respect different paths of historical development. In a similar vein, it is interesting to note that the histories of the U.S. and Latin American countries are only weaved together in the last theme on contemporary issues. Once again, the teacher who wishes to foster global awareness may need to rethink this conceptualization and pose additional questions.

One of the difficulties in fostering global awareness in these teaching strategies is that their structure precludes a sense of historical development and periodization. In some lessons the time frame of study is never provided (for example lesson 5 on the Incas.) In others there is no sense of historical trajectory or of popular struggle. The Mexican revolution, for example, is actually presented as a chronological list of events; a fait accompli. The teacher who wishes to give students the perspective that history does not follow a pre-determined or inevitable path, will need to flesh out the chronology and add in the sense of struggle that comes about when people choose to make their own destiny. Students need to learn the complexity of making decisions which have far-reaching consequences for history.

This absence of historical rooting is concomitant with the weak attention given to skills development and writing. Firstly, there is no development of skills

across the unit or within the lessons. The kinds of activities that the students are asked to do in the last strategy are no more difficult than those in the earlier lessons. Secondly, the kinds of skills emphasized within the lessons are limited to translation, interpretation and application type skills. Even in lesson 27, the unit's end, the questions asked do not move beyond simple translation and interpretation skills. This lesson's aim is to assess the contribution of Latin American poets to global culture. The professed objectives are to identify universal themes in the genre, as well as to root the poems in the specific Latin American historical experience. Four poems are presented and six questions asked of each poem.- mainly addressing the content and imagery. No questions critically analyze the poems, nor do they compare them or contrast their themes and images with North American or other poetry. By this stage students should be expected to compare the poems to each other, to root them in specific historical processes, and to synthesize them with other kinds of historical data. More complex questions and longer writing assignments would develop students' skills even further.

Perhaps one reason why the lessons do not fully develop the skills and concepts is because so little writing is required of the students. They are never required to write more than sentence-type answers. All too often the entire lesson may consist of students' only having to check off items on a list. It is not

a good idea to reduce conceptual thinking activities to checklists. Rather, students should be helped to expand on their ideas in progressively longer writing assignments.

In their attempt to provide creative, motivationg activities the authors have robbed the students of too many chances to indulge their own creativity and practice their writing skills. To take an example, in the lesson on the effects of colonialism students are given a TV script of a fictitious program "You are there: Lima, Peru 1780." They read a lengthy worksheet and then - in point form - list the short and long term effects of colonialism. The idea of a television interview is superb; but switching the students' reading and writing roles would develop their skills and provide a more interesting exercise. The information on the colonization of Peru could be provided in encyclopaedic form. The students could then be assigned roles and, in small groups, asked to develop the script. Likewise, in another lesson (Aim 11) on Haiti's independence, students read a longish feature article on Toussaint L'Ouverture in "Newspeople Magazine" and then write a three line epitaph. One wonders why the students are asked to write such a short piece. Their own 'Newspeople' magazine would probably make equally enjoyable reading.

The consequence of circumscribing student activities is that the unit is less inquiry based than it at first seems. While it is true that questions form the mode of discourse, students are not really taught to ask questions themselves. They never ask the questions

about the material - in preview or in thinking about the sources. The lessons do not leave the students with unanswered questions. Rather, students are interrogated through the material. This is a specific design of the curriculum: primary sources are seen as tools used "in mastering the relevant factual information." (p. x) This puts primary sources to the same use as the text-book. It would be preferable if primary sources were used to construct questions and answers. Students could be given a generalization and then encouraged to test it utilizing primary documents. For example in Strategy 6 students are told that European explorers exploited Latin American resources and people. They learn this through a variety of primary sources - a poem, a drawing, a mural, and a Mexican student's essay. They are questioned in such a way that they will draw this messsage from each of the sources. An alternate strategy might be to get them to decide whether Latin Americans were exploited by interrogating the sources. Opposing sources from Europeans or collaborators could be included. Questions could be posed for each source and then a comparative exercise could ask whether there is evidence to suggest that Latin Americans were exploited by Europeans. Students may then conclude from the lesson that the question is unanswerable given the sources at their disposal. They would then be left questioning beyond the lesson.

The aim of Social Studies teaching should be to push beyond the borders of textbooks, planned lessons and primary sources, etc. in order to develop critical thinking and writing skills applicable to the individual needs of the students. History teaching should also extend beyond the barriers imposed by contemporary stereotypes in traditional curricula, old textbooks and mass media. The Global Studies unit goes a long way to reach beyond those borders. It provides topical, interesting lessons and keys to student activity and involvement. It attempts to develop skills and concepts that are useful to the students. However, the unit imposes its own structures and contains its own limitations. It does not go far enough to meet its own goals. The teacher needs to adapt the strategies, select carefully and supplement thoroughly. The teacher - as always - pushes beyond the borders of any imposed structures so that the students' minds remain open.

New York City
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